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Folding Time, Places That Linger and Other “Queer” Modes of Representing Sense of Place

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Abstract

The notion that place and identity are mutually constitutive suggests that attachments to place forge attachments to self that linger over time. In order to consider the ways in which sexual identities and places influence the development of a “queer sense of place” over time I returned to an autoethnographical experience from 2002 to write about it in 2015. Then something unusual happened - time showed itself and folded to reveal the lingering affect of place, loss and identity. By drawing upon insights from then (2002) and now (2015), with sense making in between, I create an assemblage of moments crafted poetically as a conversation between myself from then and myself of now. By doing so I seek to represent the folding entanglement of conversations we regularly re-turn to make ongoing sense of our lives and highlight the brief moments of loss, sense making, and agency that emerge.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Sense of Place, Identity, Queer, Queer Place Making, Queer Sense of Place, Temporality, Poetic Representation

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Folding Time, Places That Linger and Other “Queer” Modes of Representing Sense of Place

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The notion that place and identity are mutually constitutive suggests that attachments to place forge attachments to self that linger over time. In order to consider the ways in which sexual identities and places influence the development of a “queer sense of place” over time I returned to an autoethnographical experience from 2002 to write about it in 2015. Then something unusual happened - time showed itself and folded to reveal the lingering affect of place, loss and identity. By drawing upon insights from then (2002) and now (2015), with sense making in between, I create an assemblage of moments crafted poetically as a conversation between myself from then and myself of now. By doing so I seek to represent the folding entanglement of conversations we regularly re-turn to make ongoing sense of our lives and highlight the brief moments of loss, sense making, and agency that emerge.

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Most will agree that sometimes unusual things happen when we sit down to write, especially when we attempt to do so about ourselves, our experiences or our places. Three strange things happened to me recently when I sat down to “do something” with some qualitative data that I’d collected back in 2002. That “something” was to turn the data into a paper for the *Critical Autoethnography* conference in Melbourne in 2015. But first some background about back then.

The original data was collected on Oxford Street, Sydney, Australia in 2002 as part of a place-based assignment in a subject I was studying called *Sense of Place*. The data gathering methods I used at the time seemed logical for standing around and watching the street: participant observation, fieldwork journals and artefact collection. I also added researcher participation at key events and autobiography. I wrote “the assignment”, tidied up my scrapbook and fieldwork notes and packaged it all up for my lecturer. The package tells my story of breaking up, struggling, figuring out and healing by engaging with queer places and queer community. It was an autoethnography when I didn’t know what that was – and it was the start of my PhD journey. Now fast forward 13 years to the three strange writing things.

Firstly when I was re-reading the words from the past they began to feel a lot like my experiences of the present - I quickly realised that in some way I was *there* again – back in *that* moment. Breaking up, struggling, figuring out – and writing it all down on scraps of paper, iPhone notes and Word documents that would never be sent but had to come out. Now I don’t know if you’ve ever been *there* before but it’s an interesting place, one I thought worth exploring. This exploration opened a dialogue between the *past* and the *present* that I didn’t expect and couldn’t ignore – it was after all a call from the past and I had to answer. So rather than foreclosing on the conversation I chose to listen to it and see what played out.

Which brings me to the second thing – the poem to follow emerged from this listening as a collection of past and present moments. Through re-turning to the past and writing in the present a kind of cathartic sense making moment emerged. In and of itself this is perhaps not unusual as we do generally get “better” at breakups. What was a little strange though is that

the original autoethnography had also been during the healing phase of a 2001 breakup, and this one in the healing phase of a 2015 breakup. Again not unusual you may think – we tend to remember the healing skills we learn, draw on them and toughen up, generally getting a little better at breakups. The strange part about this story was that my past and present words, story and thoughts were more than paralleled – they merged, like time had collapsed, on me, on them. I found myself working through, and telling myself the same things now as then – this interested me because perhaps, after all we don't get better at breakups; instead we get better at re-attaching to some aspect of ourselves, our places or our sense of place¹. I had found this notion of attachment to place and self in the original data collected in 2002 as well as in my thesis (Lambert, 2006) - perhaps now all I needed to do was remind my-self to find my “sense of place” (again). So rather than foreclosing on the memory I chose to entice it by writing a new autoethnography that captured the past and the present – quite naturally it emerged as a conversation between my past and present selves punctuated by moments of sense making.

Finally, instead of blocks of prose, the collection of words materialised as a poem. In the act of writing a new autoethnography emerged built on the lingering effect of the past and the emotional rawness of the present. I found myself tangling data and theory, method and form, past and present, time and place. It was like my left brain was speaking to my right (I don't even know if that is even possible); my head to my heart (again improbably); the past to the present (unlikely). It came to me as a non-linear, kind of messy folding of time². This is what that moment of folding writing time felt like. So rather than foreclosing on the moment I chose to record it.

Whilst I have experience in this style of qualitative writing (see Lambert 2006, 2009, 2012a, 2012b), I was surprised, yet found the process very organic and clear. The poem was formed in one day more as a process of assembling than of writing. It was crafted by cutting and pasting segments of prose from the 2002 qualitative data and my 2015 personal journaling notes sequentially into rows of a table. The ideas/expressions from one to the other had to relate as from the outset I was looking for a balanced natural flow between past and present as if one spoke and then the other. Adding the neutral sense making space helped to create the link between past and present and to highlight the folding of time. This pushed me to stay reflexive and become more critical about writing autoethnographically and to seek out literature, theories, ideas or notions that helped me to sort out both what was going on in the writing as well as the experience of going through it. I was trying to build meaning in my own life at the same time as trying to “be an academic” – the sense making column helped me stay balanced about both.

By using headings I was able to delineate the then/now/sense making blocks horizontally and make the entire conversation and sense making process flow. This also permitted easy moving of segments to tell the entire story. Once in the table, the indents for each column were added to get left/right/centre justification for the conversation of then/now/sense making. Poetic devices like line dropping, removing extraneous words (e.g. and), use of punctuation methods (e.g., ... - , ;), use of editing effects (e.g., bold, capitals or italics), use of brackets and the like were then applied to the prose to tease out or find the poem. The font style was important as it represented the melding of the various segments of writing from the original autoethnography with that of today; it was added last. The table lines were then hidden to give its current format. What the reader may notice is that about

¹ I deploy the notion of sense of place dualistically as geographical (i.e., “a place” as well as self, that is, “sense of self.”

² I have no idea if I am “right” in saying this of time, space, Newton’s Laws, or linear/non-linear measures of temporality as I’m not a quantum physicist. I can however feel, and this is what it felt like. Apologies if my interpretation is scientifically “incorrect.”

half way through the lines between past (then) and present (now) become blurred. By the end it is almost not important to read two diverging stories, rather what our minds and hearts do is merge them. This also shows the lingering effect of place and loss, emotion and experience; as well as the blurred space between past and present and my clumsy notion of folding time.

Doubting that I was not “in the same place” now as then - but needing to find out - this poem is designed to be read as a stand-alone piece of writing with the methods and theorizing embedded into it alongside the “data” (though for obvious “academic” reasons I provide this brief Introduction). The exact words from the original qualitative data appear on the left hand side of the page with my newly formed journaled experiences and thoughts juxtaposed on the right hand side. As I wrote out the tangled conversation I also began to theorize it using notions from Feminist Geography and Queer Theory (then) (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Butler, 1999; Massey, 1994; Rodaway, 1994) and New Materialism (now) (Coleman, 2014; Frost, 2011). This theorizing appears in the space in between the conversation(s) and is included to bring a degree of criticality to the new autoethnography, and to help me make sense of my words at the same time as getting distance from them. The theorizing is deliberately light so as to not drive a wedge through the conversation, rather to exist as part of the entangled assemblage of it.

Missing - one sense of place (reward for safe return)

An autoethnography of a conversation between my
 present self (NOW)
 and
past self (THEN)
 with some sense making in between (SENSE)

NOW³:

I don't know where I went
 but I know I've been somewhere for the past 8 years.
 Thesis done 2006, house sold 2007, world trip 2008;
 cute, smart girl turns my world upside down ...
 love again.
 I still listen to “Everything But the Girl” but now have everything
 but the girl.

It's 2015 and I decided to change everything (even the girl) – well more precisely she
 decided to change me.

Not change me more like “set me adrift”
 (I guess that's how I could explain it, though I still don't know why).
 Pushed to the edges, the border, the periphery – just ended.
 Not like I haven't been there (or here) before.

THEN⁴:

At about 1pm

Sunday 5th August 2001 my world fell apart.

*My suspicions of my partner's infidelity were confirmed on
 this day.*

³ NOW – is my journaling and writing in the present moment 2015.

⁴ THEN – is my writing in the qualitative data from 2002.

On this day I found three months of hidden mobile phone
 bills
 ... to an unfamiliar number
 ... a secret letter addressed to her
 ... written in a hand that was neither hers nor mine.
 These things (objects) merely confirmed my fears and
 suspicions,
 they were (so to speak)
 ... the "hard evidence" of her infidelity, my naivety.

NOW:

Sometimes I think my love for her is unhealthy,
 then I think it's perfect.
 Two people can stay together forever – it's just hard work, and so few models of
 success ... Why quit because of that? Because it's hard?
 Requires guts, an "until" mindset - you know, until the end.
 For me it's "of life" – until the end of life.

Love, desire, commitment I think it's in our heads;
 we shape it how we want – if we want it to work it can.
 I wish I had my time over again with her – to
 ... be more aware
 ... speak up
 ... not settle for complacent commitment.

She has depression, needs to find her-self, for her-self.
 I can't deny her that ... nor can I let go.
 That's why I'm here, now, on the edge
 (the border, the periphery)
 Feeling lost.

THEN:

So many things that can be said about my emotions during
 the ensuing months, even now.
 I don't think this is the place for them all, though many will
 be important during the coming weeks.
 I hope I can articulate them as I explore what I might loosely
 term
 my sense of "misplacelessness".

NOW:

And then I remember ...
 I've been here before.
 I've been through all of that (all of this).
 The pain of the loss but not the loss of the pain.
 Loss of love, self, place – break ups do that to you again and again.

The many moments of mourning the space that was.

THEN:

It's all in here, in the pages that follow.

It's also about me – my developing attachment to a very special place, how it has helped to heal, enthuse, nurture ... and love me in return ...

These writings, stories, photographs, drawings tell the story of a life changed

by a place experience at a moment in space and time.

This is my story.

NOW:

Doctor of Education at UOW, 2002 a necessity (fulltime Level A job, must enrol).

I thought I wanted to study education, but I didn't.

A year in and I was bored (and sad).

I studied cross institutionally at UWS (where I worked) looking for inspiration, looking for happiness.

"Sense of Place" unit.

"You can do research like that (like this)" – inspiration and happiness perhaps?

THEN:

It's the things that I have not that I miss the most.

The things taken for granted in a stable, long-term relationship.

The things that make you lie awake at night ...

... not eat ...

... drink too much ...

... fear being alone ...

... burst into tears in the shower.

SENSE⁵:

The "Sense of Place" assignment - sitting some place, watching, observing, being; 3 hours per week for 13 weeks. Sounded like therapy to me – I took it ... it was. I chose Oxford Street, Sydney – queer city epicentre. This story is about that tract of public space, the life it supports and it's lingering affect on me.

THEN:

It's the loneliness,

⁵ SENSE – is a combination of literature, ideas and theories to help me to explain what was happening and personal sense making between 2002 and 2015.

the sense of being misplaced and displaced, that makes me the saddest.

Over the last six months I have been very sad at times.

NOW:

It's a story about then and now

An emergent parallel story 12 years in the making where the past and present weave
and have reunited to become
(dare I say it) ... the same.

FIELDWORK NOTES⁶: We are in a little "gaytown"; and for one whole night we are the majority, we are in control, we walk the streets, dance, smile and just occupy a piece of space. It doesn't have any special significance, this place. Only that it is the land upon which we meet. Tonight is the event⁷ that gives us a sense of our place, not of the place itself.

NOW:

Sure it's a different geographical place now - yet the same embodied place, the same emotional space.

Again, after all these years.

As I did then, I now sit to create a paper and wonder -

How is that even possible?

To be in the same place but at a different time?

SENSE:

"Every person's life-story begins at a certain moment in time in a particular place; and it ends at a certain time, also in a particular place" (Metzner, 1995, p. 9-10)

NOW:

Does it?

Does the story end?

FIELDWORK NOTES: What am I doing here? Is this going to simply be a diary of incidents, sights, sounds and numbers? Why are people looking at me? I've had heaps of eye contact? Is it that I am still? Writing? Watching? Will anyone ask? How will I do a "people" thing? Look at them? Smile? I'm cold, bored. I'm watching and trying to blend with the place.

NOW:

Six months – has it been that long?

Am I here (or there) again?

This paper - the product of writing myself back into the past in order to understand
the present.

My temporal lives converging right here (now) with place and identity;

in that warping, that folding

I feel like I have to go back to the last time

"I lost myself" in order to ...

⁶ FIELDWORK NOTES – are direct fieldwork notes from the 2002 Oxford Street project.

⁷ I refer here to the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival Parade and Party.

FIELDWORK NOTES: It is the event that defines us, what we do and who we do it with, not the place. It is the human interactions, the friends, and the stories re-told for weeks to come that create meaning from this event in our lives. It is in Mardi Gras, the party and parade, that we find our sense of place, and our sense of self. We see where we belong.

NOW:

Don't ask me why I'm doing this - I'm not even sure,
it just felt like the right thing to do
(you know)
bring it back to life and find a "sense of my place" ... (again).

SENSE:

By explaining the need to be inventive in our approaches to both material and discursive representations of bodies within New Materialism, Rebecca Coleman (2014) encourages me to look beyond conventional methods of thinking about subjectivity and for remembering the multiple dimensions of experiences in place and across time. This is made possible by viewing our various personal, social, located, and political assemblages (utterances, experiences, notions, words, actions, bodies) as simultaneously located within the material, discursive and temporal. In the act of assembling the various material, temporal and discursive aspects of our lives we come to make both sense and meaning.

NOW:

Who am I now?
Who is this little eternally unsafe me?
Assembling lines from the past, drifting.
Seeking strength, empowerment, community and love?
Perpetually turning in on her-self to create a self.

"It has made you stronger" (resilient you might say)
Yes it has.
Here I stand today ... resilient me,
but afraid
(again)

SENSE:

I guess now (as before) I am writing an autobiographical account of that experience. In not so traditional terms I was "hanging out" and using my senses to gather information about the social interactions, people and environmental conditions around me in one of my favourite socialising places. I was a voyeur, in a place where voyeurism is totally acceptable. I was an observer in a place where people go to be observed.

NOW:

I guess I've been "observing" my relationship for a bit too long.
Brains but no common sense – I think maybe I missed it
[you know, the end]
The time when the darkness became too much for her to bear and her-self started
to drift further away from her
[from me]

It's her black dog, following her, nagging her to pay attention.
She's been ignoring it – turning in on her-self for all those years
The melancholic subject emerging from her own constant self-nagging
[not really the dog]
Subjecting her-self to so much for so long.
It was only a matter of time before it had to stop.
We had to stop.
[I guess that's why she quit?]

FIELDWORK NOTES: How do I know Oxford St is a she? Well it just feels like it. She welcomes, she cares, caresses, supports, nurtures- has done for 200 years. Taylor Square is male - cold, stark, closed, unsafe ... after being here for so many formal and informal hours I feel that distinction. Strangely, they compliment, need and use each other. Taylor Square, the place to rest momentarily, to wait, meet, greet, score - a seedy thoroughfare. Oxford St - its arms and legs, holding the life, the shops, the people. Unsafe in one, totally engrossed in the other. Separated by a matter of metres.

SENSE:

Doreen Massey (1994) provides some insight into the dualisms created by notions of space/time, and space/place. She argues that, “space and place, spaces and places, and our sense of them ... are gendered through and through” (p. 186). She suggests that space and place are not only important in the construction of gender relations, but are also obvious in the struggles to change them. Massey sees “...gender relations as significant in the structuring of space and place, spaces and places” (p. 182). I see them in the street.

NOW:

She made a move in her own struggle with space and place.
 "I have to live with my life for my whole life and I have to do something about how I
 feel right now – alone"
 [or something like that]
 "I don't want to destroy us"
 [so better to just stop]
 I see her trying to turn the nagging dog away
 [or is it the nagging self?]

A solo affair
[or so it seems]

SENSE:

Queer human geographers suggest that queer sexualities and “gender benders” push and stretch definitive “established” geographical, political, social and heteronormative boundaries. They do this through simple, daily acts of resistance, presence and placemaking. By exploring the transformative potential of the tangled, messy and lingering memories between our bodies and places the veil between representation and reality is dropped. If we can make places, can places “make” us?

NOW:

Queer boundary pushing aside I need the basics
To just viscerally remember the answer to that question

To bring back the feeling of courage that came from that homo-normative
 experience in that place at that time
 When and where placemaking was about me
 stretching my periphery
 being totally undone
 finding a sense of (my)self.

A solo affair
 [or so it seems]

FIELDWORK NOTES: I feel I'm putting myself out there, this is part of it. I'm taking risks with people, and pushing myself. I'm giving of myself to others and getting a whole heap back. And you know what, I like it. I have had the most amazing 3-4 weeks of what I would call "taking social risks". Going out alone, meeting new people, and talking to them, laughing with them, engaging them.

NOW:
 I told a colleague about this paper, he asked why I hadn't changed (learned) from
 that experience to this.
 He warned, "that will be a criticism of the paper"
 [in an autoethnographic sense]

But I have changed (I think) and I did learn (didn't I?)

Now I'm just trying to conjure it up again to
 mourn
 cope
 find my sense of place
 find my way out
 remember that I can change.
 Shit I don't know.
 [isn't that what autoethnography is too?]

I think of it like I'm being moulded,
 shaped in, about and through experiences
 [a deep, spiralling turning inward – it's tangled very tangled]
 And sure I may arrive at another point
 [even say 12 years later]
 But ...
 ... I'm becoming – what exactly, I don't know.
 [perhaps that's the autoethnography?]
 I must ask my colleague.

FIELDWORK NOTES: [This] is why I'm here. To be myself. To be comfortable with who and what I am. My ex and I rarely showed affection in public. Don't know why, just learned not to. I don't want to do that anymore, I want to take risks and do what I feel with who I want. Perhaps that will be dangerous, but I want to be what makes me happy.

SENSE:

What is revealed in those dangerous becomings are our troubled (and flawed) attempts to re-turn to moments (to phenomena) in order to make sense of the

present. Coleman (2014) might suggest this is a process of transformation – where changing my body now is coupled to “the potential of a different future ... (as) part of the present” (p. 40) and as part of my past. In some sense I will transform now only inasmuch as I can “see” my body in the future (and lived it in the past).

NOW:

Yet bodies are messy, unpredictable
Desire so confusing
- how could anyone think they had a theory to explain any of it?
I mean,
why do I define myself based on someone else’s love?
How has this become the dominant narrative of my life?
[after all those hours of therapy]
[after that fucking thesis]
That right now, despite all I know about queer post structural feminist new material
theory I consistently constitute myself “normally”.
What ... The ... Fuck ... (whisper).

FIELDWORK NOTES: I have never done this before. I exude an extroverted, confident exterior but inside am socially uncomfortable and sorely lacking in social confidence. In my relationship, she did all of those sorts of things. The meetings, organising the dinners and functions, calling friends. I did the insurance, the tax, the banking. We had defined roles... and now I hate that I did that.

NOW:

I hate it even more that I did it (again).
So it worries me a bit ...
I mean,
if I can’t deconstruct my own life, responses, feeling, thoughts
how do I give any credibility to what and how I claim to teach?
How did I come to be sooooo tied up in normalized discourses of sexuality and
relationships when I know how they operate and that I operate them?
Can anyone ever truly be released from normativity?
Is agency a fiction, queer theorizing, in a way a joke?
What about Oxford St now?
It’s not the same.
Was (is) that all just an illusion too?

FIELDWORK NOTES: It is mystical, fleeting, extravagant, over the top, “fantasy” ... but we can take fragments of the basic pleasures of our expressed and sanctioned sexuality into our regular daily lives. Sure we all know Mardi Gras is an “unreal” time, but the feeling it creates lasts the year through, it just lingers, and that feeling on our skin, the memories in our cells provides the strength to be who we are and love who we want.

NOW:

I think it’s impossible to not attach to others through love
Sure it guarantees suffering but couldn’t a queer theorist unthink that suffering?
[at least the second or third time round]
Isn’t that the point in “moving on”?

Get rid of that normalizing tendency to feel loss, pity, shame?

SENSE:

I was drawn to a book called *Sensuous Geographies: body, sense and place* (1994) by Paul Rodaway. He describes sense as an important duality, a metaphorical dimension:

1. sense as in making sense, sense as in meaning, order and understanding
2. sense as in sensation or feeling, of the senses (touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell, balance, kinaesthesia)

NOW:

So here I am "making sense" Paul Rodaway – wondering.
Where did the Q go in my –ueer;
the sex in my (sex)ual
the sexual in my (sexual)ity?

The thing I despise yet crave all the same time,
the ultimate in normalizing
[love that is]
Do I want it?
I've felt it (no I sensed it).
Yes (I want it).

How can a QPSF theorist be so complicit in her own subjectification?
Isn't that the exact way it should be?
What's the problem with that?

SENSE:

Rodaway argues that both offer us a source of information and, of understanding. A sensuous experience is grounded in past experiences and expectations, both dependent upon sensual and sensory capacity, education and socialisation. I think this is where my view on place and geography started to change and become more sensual. Ultimately I was to discover not only in terms of what I was doing and what I saw, but also what and who I was.

NOW:

It wasn't until sometime later (in my thesis) that I really engaged with the complexity of what I was being and doing – in short with "queering".
I sensed (because of *that* autoethnography) that places and identities were mutually constitutive.
And I passed, so they must be.

FIELDWORK NOTES: What an odd day? A woman (Julianna, Peruvian) just asked me for \$3 then tried to give me a silver cigarette case clearly worth more than that. Then asked me did I want to sleep with her. All in 3 minutes. She'd been out since Tuesday afternoon. What is happening to me today? Why is this stuff happening to me?

NOW:

I asked the darndest questions back then – why don't I ask them now?
It was the Oxford St autoethnography that brought me to all of this.
It was the participants (there and later) who helped my re-work queer theory and to

use poetic inquiry to re-present their words
(but these are different stories).

FIELDWORK NOTES: I am developing a sense of Taylor Square as a thoroughfare, a transition zone. A way to get from A to B, or to meet someone. Very few people stay here still for long. There is no clock here. Is there no delineation of time? Maybe. It feels like that whenever I come out here. Endless nights that start in the day and end in the day. A timeless place. My timeless place in it.

NOW:

Simplistically (academically)

I know I can challenge, mould and stretch queer theory to fit participants who most of the time are considerably unqueer (with their essentialised notions of identity).
And that's a good skill (academically).

Realistically (emotionally)

I have no clue how to deploy it to understand myself?
And that's a poor skill (emotionally).

SENSE:

Crouch (1998) paints a lovely picture of life in the city when he speaks of the ongoing presence and movement of bodies on streets, of self and others. All moving with similar purpose, feeling and direction to create an intention and identity that is much more powerful and pervasive than any of the physical images of the street itself (its signs, shops, traffic, dwellings). He further suggests that over time these images "become culturally deafened by the ritual of occupation" (p. 167). Every Friday and Saturday night Oxford Street becomes a place for the rituals of 1000s of peoples' lives. And I feel that as we strangers walk and talk along the street we all move together with similar purpose, feeling and direction in a culturally deafening ritual of occupation. This is our place, we are together, we are community created by the converging of the material and non-material.

NOW:

Oh now I can hear it; now I remember.

That cellular resonance of one's self against others, against the street.

That embodied self.

The self who became me and somehow through comfort
(or is it complacency)
got lost.

I need that strong Karen back – I need that deafening, colourful place back.

FIELDWORK NOTES: Mardi Gras to us is about visibility, noise; it's about taking over public space; colour, extravagance, indulgence, excess; sex, sexuality, cohesion, and above all free spirited fun and freedom to be visible, to be heard, to be felt – to be sensual, sensing and sensed.

NOW:

Newness brings displacement not because it's new or even different but because it's not the same

It's somewhere different, unknown – and in that displacement you have to get to

know yourself sensuously all over again.

FIELDWORK NOTES: So much of going to the Mardi Gras parade and party is preparing for it. The tanning, the exercise, the ab work, the outfit, attending other events, the sewing bees with friends, the waxing and hair appointments. It's body focussed ... real, material, sensual ...

NOW:

There's something about being displaced that leaves a kind of ache
A sense of emptiness of what it's like to be alone and to have to grow attachments
again.

Tendrils so easily pulled out, so difficult to plant
(and at this place in my life).

FIELDWORK NOTES: This is the one time of the year that for some very odd reason - I become vain and appearance focussed. I think this year more than usual because it's about attracting others and being attractive to myself and to others now, not just looking and feeling good, and in the party spirit but being transformed by the place, by the moment.

NOW:

There's a force within me that tells me to do all that again,
yet another that insists upon laying down roots.

I mean,
who am I without a place? without some sense of why or what I'm doing?

But who do I listen to?

What version of the past do I bring forward to the present?

How does one create a holograph of the future from what remains?

As I sit in a dark room alone (again) with nothing but a bottle (again) asking who I
am (again), wondering one thing -
where did all the colour go?

SENSE

Rodaway (1994) carefully draws a link between senses, sense and place by suggesting that

... a sensuous geography cannot just describe the experience of the senses and their role in the constitution of the geographical experience, it must also consider more fundamental questions about the nature of person-environment relationships and what constitutes a geographical reality ... at a given moment in time and space" (p. 6).

NOW:

Does that geographical reality change?

Or does it stay the same, lingering in the background to be recalled when needed?

"At a given moment" – what moment?

What do we really know about time anyway?

Why haven't I changed?

My head and heart are disconnected?

But maybe I have.

Anyway, what would be the "problem" if I haven't?
(besides an academic one) ...

(You know) shouldn't an autoethnography be transformative?
 That is, not repeated?
 Not happening all over again?

FIELDWORK NOTES: Is my place experience at Oxford St really helping me? Does it matter if it isn't? Is it just an excuse? Another cover up? ... It's letting me take control, and yet allowing me to relinquish it. It engages and disengages me. Places and displaces me.

NOW:

Perhaps it's about that – that “undoing” – about not being afraid to write because it's on repeat.
 It's about gathering it up, feeling, remembering, just doing a little bit better next time round.
 You have changed, for one you're older (and you feel it).
 You also feel the loss in a different kind of way.
 “I'm not that me, I'm this me, and this me has been made possible because of that me, which was made possible because of that place”.

SENSE:

In my experience images of Oxford St are quite often surreal, and voyeuristic. It is a place to be and be seen. One's sexuality is worn on one's sleeve. Going out, coming out and being out on Oxford St involves a strangely compulsory celebration of queer commodification, and we who attend are all players, and do it by choice and willingly. In Oxford St we can all gaze and feel, be surveilled, know and act because the “place” is inclusive and accepting of our individual and collective desires and choices.

NOW:

See it is the place.
 “So now I just crave that place (again)” –
 [you think it's that place – surely it's not that you thought?]
 “It's not the same conversation” –
 [yes it is, it's about loss; lost self, lost place, lost sense of place]
 “It's not the same experience then” –
 [yeah but it is the same storyline]
 “Right, so I'm glad it is because even that story in that place had a happy ending –
 me being (not) unhappy (again).
 Me being strong and hopeful; trusting and brave” –
 [Yeah, transformed by loss?]
 [There, that should make the autoethnographers happy]

THEN:

I often felt as though I was not an outsider looking in but rather, as Coffey (1999) suggests, a reflective insider, continually “negotiating roles and subjectivities, looking out” (p. 57).

NOW:

Where does that leave me now, in the present moment with its multiple intersecting

material, discursive and spatio-temporal forces?
 Looking for self and place
 searching for even more stories from the past to create a temporally and
 geographically displaced present subjectivity.
 But I created that already ... Didn't I?

SENSE:

I suggest the same may also apply in coupling the past to the present. In this sense the past functions as a punctuation (or maybe a juncture or in-juncture) on the future. This means that our becoming, learning or changing (anything) in either the present or the future emerges as the result of “complex, recursive and multi-linear” forces (Frost, 2011, p. 71). In short bringing the past into the present and giving it agency can be performative (and productive) as a way of surviving within our complex, sensual and sometimes recurrent lives. Similarly Rodaway (1994) argues we could view the senses as geographical ... in that they contribute to orientation in space, and awareness of spatial relationships and an appreciation of the specific qualities of different places, both currently experienced and removed in time (p. 37).

NOW:

“Removed in time” –
 Does that mean that the constitution of place and self is time qualified?
 Emerging as a kind of “a wake up call” for and of the present (or the future)?
 That it's OK to be “on repeat” emotionally any-place, any-time?
 And that fancy theorising invites such thoughts?
 Is it possible that all we can ever do is try to make sense of the present via fading
 unreliable fragments of the past?
 A messy assemblage?

THEN:

*By using my senses I've been able to locate the place and it's
 various aspects,
 plus my place and my self.
 The whole process having been
 (in fact)
 a sensuous geographical experience in, and of, place and self.*

NOW:

What have I learned?
 How have I been transformed?
 Well for one I've learned love and commitment don't cure depression
 [or so it seems]
 And that I'm a bundle of contradictions.

THEN:

*Originally I thought I was part of the “study”
 (In fact) I was the study.*

This work was not about them it was about me – my autobiography, my record of myself.

I soon had to learn what it was I wanted and needed from them, and the place so that I could develop understandings about my own engagement with the place.

NOW:

So is it that I need to reclaim that autobiography?
My life is in fragments and I'm wondering does it matter what order they are re-assembled.
Are our lives linear or cyclic?
Punctuated by "moments" and places we return to?
Does community have anything to do with it?
Is it all just 'in our heads' made sense of when we need to?

FIELDWORK NOTES: I'm beginning to see myself as an OK person. I thought I had potential, but I just didn't go through with it. I haven't felt I was an OK person for a long time, even before the break up. This assignment has a role to play with all of that. I think my self esteem and self confidence is definitely improving. I'm not afraid of people, what they may say to me, what I may say to them- what they may find out about me. I'm not afraid of social settings and discomfort- because I can always leave. I am in control. I can make my own decisions and do what I like, and not have to answer to anyone else. I'm not afraid to show others parts of me, even vulnerable ones. I'm not afraid to tell them that I care about them, like them or even love them.

NOW:

For not the first time today I wondered who I am.
It was really windy and I stared at the trees bending, the wind made the chimes tingle against the backdrop of the leaves being blown.
It made me think of that saying about trees falling down in the woods, if no-one hears does it mean it didn't happen.
If I don't tell anyone does it mean the wind never blew?
Do things only exist in relation to others and because we share them?

SENSE:

Tamara Winikoff (1995) shares an idea that we move through space but stop and make and interact with places. In this act of place-making spaces are turned into places that have meaning for people, give pleasure and resonate feeling, memory, and stories. This act of place-making need not be hindered by the "usual" biological, cultural, social or linguistic baggage that often complicates theorising about bodies and spaces. Rather what might emerge is the possibility for a third space – an openly troubled site primed for the emergence of a new kind of tousled entity that exists in neither past, present or future yet nonetheless "is".

NOW:

I thought about being here, in this place, isolated, alone and wondered if I actually existed.
For surely if the wind doesn't exist because I have no-one to share it with, then so it should follow that I do not exist because I have no-one to tell about me?
At what point do I become me?

Is it only in an utterance from me?
 Or is it only when such an utterance is heard? When shared?
 If there's no-one around when Karen falls down in the woods, does that mean that
 she's not in the woods?
 Or that she didn't fall down?

THEN:

When I was at my place I didn't just observe buildings, cars, shops, and strangers walking by. Sometimes people interacted with me.

This often surprised me ...

I didn't ask for it, tried not to project myself as being someone to engage with.

Often it was just an inquisitive glance, "what's she doing with that pen and paper?" type thing.

Friends became part of the process - spying me spying them they would run from out of venues with "what are you doing?"

That made me laugh.

SENSE:

I really relate to the notion that streets and places are not just the sites of everyday interactions, and for living and working, but that they also provide a stage for our stories, our beliefs and values, our sense of self and belonging,

It is the landscape of everyday life with its patterns of recognition and neglect that shape our values and attitudes to place (Winikoff, 1995 p. 14).

NOW:

Patterns of neglect – what am I neglecting?

Some speak of life as having a purpose, a lesson (as it were).

Well at least we tell ourselves that in order to have the courage to do it again.

SENSE:

In my case this experience has been a kind of self awakening, in queer terms a "coming out"; in my own mind a developing sense of sexuality from the streets, the interactions and the emotional place from which I now look out at the world.

NOW:

Sometimes it feels like I'm "falling in a well" (again)

This time my fingertip is only just scraping the top of a dark, deep lake.

It just scraps the surface and makes the barest of ripples.

This was once where my whole fist punched straight through, and sank towards the bottom

It was just so far down, such a dark, deep place.

FIELDWORK NOTES: I wore a small pair of black and white hot pants, long black

boots and a body painted bikini top to match. I have never felt so free, so liberated, safe, comfortable and sexy. Also so good about myself and who I was, and what I was. I was surrounded by people I loved and who loved me, we were all sharing a very special, common experience. And that we could all feel the same way at the same time is just amazing. Such is the effect that this event has on "us."

NOW:

I'm kind of stumped.

Refusal or denial. Entrapment or freedom. Mind or body. Place or self. Ripple or dive.

What is it that I want?

Where will I find it?

Surely not in those black and white hot pants?

SENSE:

Engwicht (1999) comments that streets and "home territory" provide a strong sense of place, "and a sense of place can be very important in developing our identity as people. A sense of place is a feeling or affinity with the physical environment" (p. 14).

NOW:

I've done it 3 times and I don't really want to do it anymore.

Love that is.

I want to stay OUT, out in my place.

To do that (now) I have to find something that I lost; a small thing that I held for a little while, but then went missing when I spiralled IN.

Love that is.

I've lost my sense of place, and I kind of want it back.

SENSE:

This is not just about the physical things, it also includes the emotions, memories, stories, and affections. These things, when we see and feel them have the ability to reconfirm our identity. This is what Oxford St does for me every single time I visit it.

NOW:

We spiral in on a journey to a particular event

[for example meeting a random stranger and falling in love]

Then over time everything moves back out from that

[or is it back in?]

Into an infinite number of other events, until the bond is broken and then we unravel completely.

Then back out of the periphery we spiral back in to the same event

[for example meeting another random stranger and falling in love]

In a different time and place – but as part of the exact same journey.

REPEATED.

SENSE:

Relationships occur between places and people, and if we can delve deep enough into our selves and places we can experience a profound sense not only of the place, the interactions and the people, but also of ourselves.

NOW:

Is it not possible to think of both these events as the same event?
 It looks the same, feels the same – is this how all relationships work?
 What's the point?
 Out then in.
 In then out.
 Out then in ... In then out.
 For as many times as you care to put yourself through it.
 Seems a bit pointless.
 Surely there is more to this journey and this life than twisting from event to event
 seeking ...
 Seeking what?
 A sense of belonging? A companion?
 Seriously is that it – the meaning of life?

SENSE:

T.S. Eliot from the *Four Quartets*,
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time. (as cited in Metzner, 1995, p. 10)

NOW:

Seriously is that it?

FIELDWORK NOTES: I am beginning to feel a distant connectedness, almost like I'm becoming part of the street scene myself. Though distant because I don't live here, nonetheless a growing sense of this place.

SENSE:

Within space, place and community a mutual exchanging of gifts to each other can be observed, felt, experienced but most of all, sensed. A conversation, a smile, a glance, eating, walking, sitting, talking. We share, we communicate without even knowing within our communal space. These things build community, and are essential elements of our emotional, spiritual and psychological well-being ... our sense of self through our sense of place.

NOW:

I check in ...
 ... maybe that is it ...
 ... it feels OK ...

THEN:

The meanings that I've drawn from my experiences over the past months may help to shape my future decisions and actions

[but I don't know].

It's not that I was searching for the meaning of life, or messages about what I should do with my life ...

Rather,

I felt as though I was looking for my potentialities,

what I might be able to become
[also reflecting upon what I had become]

SENSE:

Perhaps what Joseph Campbell (1988, p. 3) has observed is true,

People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our own inner-most being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.

NOW:

Do I still carry it?

What?

The rapture of being alive or the pain?

Both probably.

Maybe psychically as that which emerges from loss, my melancholically constituted identity

[Butler would love that]

Of my passionate attachment to that loss, that pain and that place

[Freud would love that]

Here I am, now, at the point where the subject comes to know themselves for the first time.

Forever making sense of my place(s) and simply becoming –
 content to just feel the rapture of being alive?

THEN:

I certainly feel alive now.

I breathed

ate

slept before (I still do)

but I feel somehow different in relation to myself.

Maybe ... just to acknowledge how I feel, to be who I want to be is what I have derived.

Perhaps ... it was just part of the natural grieving and healing process. But the end result would have been different had I not done this.

It would have been different had I not gone to this place.

In so many ways I don't even think that this is the end, I actually believe it might be the beginning.

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